

defibrillation

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defibrillation

by [mballyntyne](#)

Summary

He wonders how many times he'll see the same family members sobbing over the same relatives. He wonders if grief can only ever be a circle.

OR Langdon gets stuck in a time-loop reliving one of the worst days of his entire life.

Notes

this show has me *obsessed*.

okay, so. this fic is pretty dark (and a bit silly, and I've had HEAPS of fun writing it!), but I've lost any sense of what darkness is any more because I've reread this so many times. I've put everything I can think of in the tags, so that is a fair warning. but also it's a hopeful ending!

also I have played fast and loose with some things in the show here, particularly medical things, so if you see anything different or wrong, no you didn't.

also also, I have included parts of the Shema, and I did a bunch of research, but I'm also very aware that I'm not Jewish and any research I do isn't going to meet the level of actually knowing if something is a good or bad thing to do, so pls let me know if I need to remove it!

also x3, I wrote this while listening to *As Satellites Go By* by Lamb, *I Am Right On Time* by The Bleachers, and *Easy* by MisterWives, and I dunno if it helps with a mood check or something but feel free to hit them up (even if only to be confused by my music tastes!).

also x4, come say hi on [tumblr](#)!

- mouse

NOTE: sorry to everyone who read this in the first hour lol, I've only just realised my formatting had cut like 200 words from the end scene! have fixed now though.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

There's a sound like a gunshot.

And Langdon finds himself standing at the nurses' station in the middle of the ED.

He'd just been here. He'd *just* been here, and he'd blinked, and suddenly instead of blood covering the floor and the sound of medical treatment being given and questioned and given again and the chaos of the dying, there's ... nothing.

No, not nothing.

There's *normalcy*.

The beds in the rooms to either side are full, but the patients are *in* rooms, not in the middle of the floor clogging up the paths of the doctors. The staff moving around him aren't gowned either, or masked up, and there's no hint of red tingeing everything he's looking at. The only night shift staff member he can see is Abbot, who leaks danger out of every glance.

"Where's my overly obnoxious 'good morning'?"

Langdon startles, almost dropping the tablet he hadn't realised was in his hands.

Collins, standing beside him, stares at him for a long moment and then frowns. "Are you okay?"

"Uh," he hesitates, "yeah. Just tired." He shakes his head but her frown deepens.

"You don't sound like it. You don't *look* like it either."

"Who doesn't look like what?" Another startle, but it makes Dana laugh instead of frown. "We're short-staffed so no one better be calling in sick." She eyes Langdon up and down. "You're looking more jittery than usual. How many of those energy drinks have you had already?"

"None." It's the truth but there's a current running under his skin, threading through his veins, and he lets out a long breath. His hands, pressed against the counter top, steady somewhat. "It's nothing, really. I'm good."

"Yeah?" He doesn't know what Dana sees when she looks at him but her eyes narrow anyway. "Well, tell me if you aren't feeling well. We

can't have you passing it onto the patients. And quit with the scowling, would you? You're bringing the mood down."

"Not like the dying patients, right?"

Dana points a finger at him. "Hey, don't get smart with me. No one's dying on my watch, at least not at," she checks her watch, "seven in the morning. How early did you get in here, anyway?"

He struggles for a minute to remember.

Yesterday morning, or *this* morning, or whatever it had been, had been early. It hadn't been that he was escaping his household. Not at all. It was just that Abby had grumbled something about the time when he'd woken her as he'd crawled out of bed, and the new puppy he'd brought home two days ago had peed as soon as it'd seen him enter the kitchen next to its bowl of food, and the baby had started crying for the fourth time that night as he'd tiptoed past the kids' bedroom door. Tanner had woken up and asked where he was going, and his whispered response of *work* had started a tantrum.

He loves those kids. He loves Abby. He even loves the puppy, or he loves how much Tanner had loved it as he'd brought it inside. But it's easier to be walking the floors of the hospital than the floors of his home, easier to find ways to help people here instead of the itching feeling that he's not doing enough. A puppy, a new TV, a handbag, and Abby still looks at him like she's frustrated.

Here, he can do something and the people he's doing it for will be grateful.

Langdon glances up at the board and does a double-take.

Familiar names. Familiar symptoms. Familiar problems that he already knows how to solve.

Trauma can cause memory lapses, and nothing about the mass shooting had been easy. Seizures and brain conditions start to make it a list. Hallucinogens and fevers can cause faulty memories, and exposure to some chemicals, or psychosis, or a mental break, or too many of those fucking lithium pills, or something else deeply, deeply wrong—

He presses the back of his hand to his forehead.

"Langdon. I asked how early you were in here this morning." Dana

frowns. “You sure you’re not getting sick?”

Langdon shrugs. Shakes his head. Shrugs again. Both Collins and Dana watch him with careful eyes. “I’m fine,” he says finally. “Ready to get stuck into this mess.”

Familiar footsteps approach, and Robby joins them at the nurses’ station, eyeing the board quickly and then making his way through the various tablets.

“You know the rules,” Robby says with a sideways glance that shows he’s overheard what was being said, “if you’re sick, you’re not allowed in my ED.”

“I’m not,” Langdon protests, sidling closer. “I was just wondering though, have you noticed anything weird going on?”

It’s asked in an undertone because they all know that information passes between the nurses like flies over dead meat, and because if anyone knows something that’s going wrong, it’ll be Robby. Langdon isn’t sure if a senior attending is meant to have his hand in so many pies, but either way, it works, and importantly it works right now.

If anyone will know, if anyone will be able to explain this, it will be Robby.

“Weird how?” Robby picks up another tablet and flicks through the patient’s information.

“I dunno, just ... strange.”

Robby glances over and raises an eyebrow at him. “Strange as in the group of people dressed in chipmunk costumes that I just passed in the waiting room, or strange as in I need to call Psych down here?” He huffs. “Go get the newbies for me, would you? We’re about to round.”

“Newbies?”

Robby puts down the tablet completely. “New interns, new doctors, new students. It’s been in the staff group texts for over a week now. Ringing any bells?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, sure.”

Robby nods but Langdon can feel his gaze following him across the ER, and when he turns before heading into the triage area, he sees

Robby leaning across the desk to talk to Dana, both of them looking at him.

He finds McKay hidden away in a room with a patient with nasty burns across her hand. The woman's hair is wet and she's trembling just slightly, and there are children sitting in the corner watching the procedure carefully, and it's that more than anything that catches his attention enough to say, "McKay, we're—"

He stops dead.

There's three of them. The newcomers. All of them looking, if not excited, then at least somewhat eager to be here, and he knows how that changes. He's seen it, he's *seen* it, what the fuck is this—

"Doctor Langdon, you okay?" It's McKay, reaching for him slowly, carefully, like he's about to shatter, and he finds himself wavering a little on his feet.

The patient is watching him. The newcomers are watching him. The patient's *kids* are watching him, all wide-eyed and afraid, even though their mom sits in the bed with burns streaking across her hand.

This is all just—all just a bad dream. A really fucking bad dream, the sort that happens in movies and those in-between episodes of the crappy daytime TV shows he sometimes watches when he's stuck on nights and can't sleep.

They're all waiting for him to fuck up. They're all sitting there watching and waiting for him to fuck up, god, he's so fucking stupid, they know, of course they know—

"Mateo, get Doctor Robby."

"I'm fine. Just tired." Play along, he thinks. Let this ... whatever it is run its course. If it's a drug-induced hallucination, if it's a mental break, well, he's had plenty of experience hiding behind a facade. "It's been a long night."

"Tanner keep you up?" McKay asks sympathetically, and he lets her press her hand against his arm. She's got a kid too, hasn't she? A son? Older than Tanner, but he's a good kid. Harrison, he thinks, or Henry.

"Something like that."

He leads them from the room, McKay's hand still on his arm, and as

much as he tries to discreetly shake it off, she doesn't let go.

Across the floor, Mateo is talking to Robby, and Robby is nodding at something he's saying, but when the group approaches, the conversation comes to a halt.

"As you can see," Robby says, nodding to the group, "we have some new faces with us this morning. Good morning, good morning, come on over. Starting with second year resident, Doctor Melissa King, fresh from the VA."

He shifts out of the way and Mel steps forward.

"Everyone calls me 'Mel'." Langdon could've told them that. He could tell them about how she has a sister in a care facility that she loves, and how she smiles at his jokes even when she isn't sure he's joking, and how her hands are as steady as he's ever seen while doing a criske, and how the fear begins to enter her eyes as patients flood the ED punctured with gunshots. "I'm so happy to be here."

"Trinity Santos, intern."

"Victoria Javadi, MS3."

"Uh, Dennis Whitaker, MS4."

Robby smiles at them. "Welcome to The Pitt."

Dana says something about a trauma incoming, but Langdon can't keep his eyes off the newcomers.

Mel, smiling, her hands free from blood-stained gloves. Santos, wary already, like she's clocked all of them and hasn't decided where to put them yet, but also tentatively eager. Whitaker, looking like a wet cat even in his first set of scrubs. Javadi, whose mother hasn't been by yet, or maybe she has. Maybe he's missed it already. He can't remember when he found out she was Doctor Shamsi's daughter. She looks far younger than he remembers though. They all do.

Trauma does that to a person.

"Doctor Langdon. *Doctor Langdon.*"

"Hm?" He glances up.

They've moved without him noticing, though his feet have followed them regardless. His body knows this floor better than he does, and he

could walk it in his sleep.

“Your sign-out?” Robby frowns at him and tilts his head towards the man sitting in the bed.

“Oh.” It’s been at least an hour since he’s looked at this patient’s details, let alone their symptoms and treatment. He can barely remember stepping foot inside this room. “Uh ...”

“Man, what’s wrong with you?” the patient asks. “You were just in here, like, half an hour ago.” He’s got a bandage covering his left shoulder, thick in the way of a deep wound, and Langdon desperately wracks his memory.

Some ‘playing the part’ he’s doing. How many fuck-ups is he allowed before he reaches a threshold for his swipe card being revoked?

“And this is why we chart, people.” Robby looks knowingly at the students. “We are dealing with hundreds of patients each day, and each one of them has unique symptoms and unique needs, but we are only human. I recommend you stay focused, stay alert, and stay on top of your charting.”

He can’t slip. He can’t slip again. One more fuck-up and Robby won’t be letting him back in, not properly. Not like when he needed him last night, or this night, or whenever some nutjob with a gun is going to take out his anger on a bunch of kids.

He has to be careful this time.

“Frank, you okay?” Robby’s pulled him aside without him realising, and he sees Collins taking the newcomers to the next room, checking back over her shoulder to eye the two of them with something approximating concern. It’s always hard to tell with Collins; he’s never seen anything phase her.

Not like him.

But there’s a sharpness in Robby’s voice now, and real concern on his face that almost has the man reaching for him, and so Langdon nods, and swallows, and smiles as reassuringly as he’s able. He knows more than anyone here how difficult today will be, and he’s not going to fuck it up before he absolutely has to.

“Good to go, boss. Sorry. It was a slow start this morning but it won’t happen again.”

"I will send you home if you're sick," Robby warns, "short-staffed or not."

You're done. Leave now or I will have Ahmad escort you out.

No. No, no, no, Robby can't send him home, he *can't*—

"No," Langdon says firmly. "No, I'm—I'm fine. Just tired from ... last shift."

Robby watches him for a long moment. "Alright. But if I end up having to scrape you off my floor, the next open bed will be yours." He claps Langdon on the shoulder. "And drink less of those Red Bulls, would you? Have some coffee like the rest of us with hearts we want to keep intact."

A call from outside the room startles him once more, but he's behind Robby now and out of sight. He doesn't miss the way Santos' gaze catches his though, and her eyes narrow.

"Hey, Doc!"

Langdon can't even look at Louie without knowing. Without hearing Robby in his ears and the sound of the locker door opening.

"And we all know Louie Cloverfield," Robby is saying. "Blood alcohol of point-four-two-oh at eleven PM."

Louie grins. "I've been cutting back."

Someone mutters something and Robby shakes his head. "That's a lethal dose for you and me. That's happy hour for Louie. What's he had so far?"

Langdon didn't know the other patient, the one with the shoulder injury, but he knows this. "Had two rounds of lorazepam."

"Hold out your hands for me, Louie."

Louie's hands shake where they are held out in front of him.

Langdon's hands shook like that too when he'd been weaning himself off the painkillers. They still shake sometimes. Withdrawal's a bitch, but he plays the game.

There's a missing tooth, and male and female victims of a train ... something. They fell, he thinks, maybe onto the train tracks. Or maybe

they were pushed. He doesn't remember anyone getting hit by a train, or a train derailment, but he *does* remember the degloved leg and Javadi going pale on the other side of the bed.

Crash, Santos had called her. They'd had far worse names for the med students in his year. Langdon's passed out before, but it's never been on the floor of the ED.

In the end, he finds it doesn't matter if he remembers the patients or not. He acts on autopilot because medicine is woven into his very sinews, and his sometimes-shaky hands know how to heal broken bodies even if they aren't good at healing much else.

Robby flits in and out of rooms with the needs of the patients and the needs of the staff, and Langdon watches him carefully as he does so. He doesn't know what he's looking for exactly. Hell, he doesn't even know what it was that tipped Robby off the first time, what it was that made his mentor believe Santos, a new face and an *intern*, instead of his own senior resident, but he'll fix it this time. He will. He won't get kicked out and he'll help out with the MCI, and Robby won't look at him like he's had the world ripped out from under his feet, and that gnawing feeling in Langdon's stomach will finally go away.

The living dead come in just before seven-thirty, and Langdon follows them because he can, because he knows what's coming, and because he wants to make sure that this day is *exactly* the same as the last. No surprises.

"Stop the compressions," he tells Mohan, who stares at him incredulously.

"What?"

"There's a DNR."

"We don't know that," Mohan says, but Dana is already leaning into the room on the phone.

"Call it," she says, hand over the receiver. "Nursing home just faxed us a DNR."

"Told you. Stop compressions."

There's a moment of silence, or a "moment of silent reflection" as Robby likes to call it, and Langdon finds himself even more fidgety than the first time, unable to stand still and unable to look at the body

of the woman.

She's old, older than nearly anyone he knows on this side of the States, and he's seen her die before. The second time watching this should be easier. But instead he finds himself uncomfortable, like he's been cramped in a box with the lid closed, and looking at her feels like the walls are closing in.

He scrambles from the room when Whitaker's phone goes off, and Mel finds him at the nurses' station charting with his head down, trying to get on top of the patients and work out what has happened already and what is still incoming.

"Uh, I have a lethargic four-year-old, no PMH, no antecedent illness, no fever or vomiting. Parents just couldn't wake him up this morning."

He's out of his chair before she's even finished. "What room?"

"Oh, South 15."

He trusts Mel. Likes her too, as a doctor and as a person. She's good with the medicine and good with the patients, and even in this ... loop or whatever, if she has concerns, he has absolute confidence that those concerns are valid. And if he's honest with himself, he likes that she still trusts him, even though Robby doesn't. Didn't. Back then, in the after.

Mel continues as they walk, "There's no nuchal rigidity, no skin lesions, no focal neuro. He looks well fed and cared for."

"DKA from new-onset diabetes?"

"No, BG 85."

He stutters to a stop in the doorway, and Mel almost walks into him.

The boy's lying there on the bed, barely able to open his eyes. Blonde hair, too light to be Tanner's, but he's around the same age, and Langdon would wager that when this kid feels better than he does now, he's as much of a handful as his own son.

"Test the kid for cannabis." His gaze moves from the boy to the boy's father.

The mother gives a startled laugh. "Cannabis? We don't do drugs! And

all our medicines are locked away in the cabinet, Tyler can't reach them." But Langdon's gaze remains on her partner and gradually she turns to look at him too, eyes slowly growing wider and face paling more than it should. "Drew? Drew, what did you do?"

"He had them in his coat pocket," Langdon answers for Drew. He remembers this too. "Left them for Tyler to find, huh? Nothing like some gummies to help the development of a four-year-old's brain."

"Are you fucking serious?" The mother launches herself at Drew. "Get the fuck out, I mean it!"

There's a medicine cabinet in Langdon's house too, far above the fridge, and it's always locked even though Tanner isn't able to reach any higher than the fridge handle. The only person who's ever found his drugs is Robby.

Langdon sticks his head out the door and calls for security.

"Um, what happens now?" Mel asks him in a low voice as they leave. Behind them, inside the room, the mother starts shouting.

"I'll call our social worker, Kiara, and she'll talk to both of them, figure out what's going on." He goes to put a hand on her shoulder, but she flinches away before it gets anywhere close, and he drops it. He'd forgotten about that. "It's a mandatory report to child services and possibly the police, but they won't lose the kid." He ducks to look her in the eyes as much as she's able. "They'll get a slap on the wrist and go home once Tyler recovers, I promise."

It doesn't sound good to promise that these parents won't face consequences for taking risks with their kids in the same way other parents would, but he can see the way Mel's face is wavering between uncertainty and a desperate need for reassurance, and it's not so much a promise of double standards as it is of ... an outcome. And he knows the outcome.

Besides, his own kids are safe at home and will be fast asleep by the time he gets home tonight, and he can only hope the smell of blood doesn't linger when he arrives. Tanner hates it.

He'll be checking the lock on the medicine cabinet too, and the one on his bedside drawers where he keeps his librium—the librium. Benzos to cope with withdrawal won't be putting his kid in hospital too.

It gets easier after that. To fall into a pattern. To fall into place.

He's faster than he's been and he feels their eyes tracking him as he makes decisions without waiting. Once, he catches Robby watching him, his lips thin like he's worried about something, and he doesn't meet Langdon's gaze.

It happens suddenly, out of the corner of his eye.

Male. Hair to the collar. Avoiding eye contact. Dark hoodie.

He knows this. He *knows* this.

"Hey! *HEY!*"

He tackles the kid, whatever his name is, and they both hit the floor.

Langdon hadn't seen the shooter the first time before ending up back on his feet with the sun shining, but he'd overheard enough from McKay to know that this kid is dangerous and that there had been whispers going around about him possibly picking up a gun.

Robby rushes out of the room the kid had just come from. "What the hell is going on?"

"He's got a gun," Langdon says, loudly, and instantly they are surrounded.

The kid—David, he finds out—is searched and protests viciously the entire time. Finally, Ahmad leans back and shakes his head.

No gun.

Of course, he wouldn't have brought it into the hospital in the first place, it was only after he came back that he—

"You thought he had a gun and your first instinct was to jump on him?" Robby asks, eyebrow raised even as he helps Langdon to his feet. He can't tell if the man is amused or disapproving.

"You say it like it's a bad thing." He glances to the room beside them where David's mother is watching through glass, her hands close to her chest like she wants to protect them. "She say anything?"

Robby follows his gaze and sighs. "Husband passed away from COVID four years ago, David isn't coping with it well. She found a list in his room."

That's what all this is about? "What, his mom did all that to herself for

some—some ranked MySpace list?”

It takes a moment but there’s a gravity in Robby’s face that Langdon hasn’t seen in years when he replies, “Not that sort of list.”

Langdon’s eyes widen. “Oh shit.”

“He’s being put on a 72-hour psychiatric hold, his mother’s just signed the form.” He sighs again and runs a hand down his face. “We should all be grateful this didn’t turn into a shooting.” He sends a knowing glance to Langdon, and for a split second Langdon thinks Robby knows what’s coming. But then he remembers the weeks and months and years he’s been working here, and how they’ve put up a tally chart for how many guns show up behind closed doors when they’re stripping patients in trauma. He knows at least four people have money riding on it reaching triple digits before the year is out, but all of them know the risks. They face them every day.

“I’m signing you up for lessons with Donnie though,” Robby says as he walks away. “That was the saddest tackle I’ve seen in my life.”

The scurvy patient, the heart attack patient, the STEMI, and he’s getting into a rhythm now.

They look at him strangely when he brings up diagnoses he shouldn’t know yet but he can’t slow down, not now, not yet, not when he could be instrumental in saving someone’s life. For that person and for him.

He’s been given a second chance and he’s not going to waste it.

He asks Dana about the kid that overdosed, the one stuck in Central 7 with a tube down his throat and no brain function, and he tries to imagine what that would be like if it was Tanner, lying there already dead with his lungs still being forced to breathe. He tries to imagine what it would be like if it was Tanner entering the ED on an ambulance gurney, compressions going and barely breathing, and the staff couldn’t get them a bed.

He’s torn between the two.

A patient comes in from Pittfest and for a moment he thinks it’s starting early, that the shooter has already arrived, but only minutes later he’s back in the room trying to fix what falling rigging has damaged. Made worse by oxygen being forced into lungs with a pneumothorax, and fuck, he’d forgotten about this.

Garcia strides into the room. “What the hell are you doing? Pneumo is tiny, it’ll resolve itself spontaneously.”

Langdon wants to laugh. “Yeah, it *was* tiny until the patient went on BiPAP.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Guardwire out.”

“His sats were down.” Santos’ voice shakes and he’s glad. She *should* feel afraid. She should feel as afraid as this patient would, if he weren’t unconscious, knowing that a doctor made a mistake that might kill him. “I—I gave the order.”

“Without clearing it with me,” Langdon mutters under his breath. If it was stressful fixing this the first time, now it’s doubly so because he’s working with two days parallel to each other. His brain was on during the first. Now, with the recognition, he can feel it starting to slip, can feel the excitement leaking out of him at no longer facing something new but instead simply something urgent. Boredom has killed many a patient.

There’s a moment, and then Garcia says, “Honest mistake from the rookie. That’s how we learn.”

His head shoots up. “She almost killed the fucking patient because she didn’t *ask* me before putting him on BiPAP, can you keep it in your pants for *one fucking second?*”

Garcia’s eyes go cold. “Doctor Langdon, that was unprofessional.”

“So is your attitude towards someone who fucked up.” He glances between the two of them. Santos is red, eyes wide and hands frozen, and Garcia looks like she’s about to snap his neck.

“Out,” Garcia says. “Now.”

Footsteps follow him out and Robby meets him where he stands with his fists clenched against his face, the gloveless skin of his knuckles raw against his eyelids.

“What was that?”

“If she’d just come to me—”

“You and I both know that could’ve happened on its own without

BiPAP,” Robby says in the placating way that shows he’s trying to ward something off.

“That’s not the point.” Langdon drops his hands. “The point is—”

“That she should’ve asked you? She made a call.” Robby shrugs. “It was the wrong one. Yes, she should have raised it with someone more senior, but she had genuine concerns for the patient’s wellbeing, and we’re able to fix her mistake.”

“We can’t *afford* mistakes, Robby. Not like this. We’re holding people’s lives in our hands, and they can’t afford to have anyone less than perfect. They shouldn’t be paying for our fuck-ups.”

It’s hypocritical, he knows it is, but at least when he makes mistakes they’re ones that only a senior resident would make, someone who knows far more than Santos at least. And his other mistakes, the unspoken ones that weigh every moment he spends in Robby’s presence? They barely even affect the patients at all.

“We’re a teaching hospital.”

“So you’re just going to let her cowboy around in the ER?”

Robby raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what we’re all doing?”

“She’s an *intern*. She’s only been out of medical school for a few months, she needs to learn to respect the experience of the rest of us.”

“It was an honest mistake, Langdon. Leave it at that.”

He moves between patients once more. Talks to the nurses about one. Talks to Robby about another. Removes a cockroach from a woman’s ear. Observes a fasciotomy. Reduces a hip. Tells a patient he has dead worms in his brain, more bluntly than he thinks Robby intended, but the man gets the gist, and at the end of the day, no one is crying or calling for a lawyer. He fixes all of them, *without* mistakes.

His one big mistake isn’t affecting anything else, and he’s fine with keeping it that way.

There’s an honour walk for the OD patient, and Langdon stands with his back pressed to the wall, trying not to watch the parents pass him.

That’s their son. Their *son*. They’ve watched him grow, they’ve watched him change into a person they can be proud of, and they still

are. Proud, that is. He can see it in the way they hold their heads, the way they accept the condolences, the way they barely take their eyes off the teenager lying in that bed.

So many of them won't grow. So many of them won't age. So many of them suffer inside and outside the hospital, and he can't do anything about it except watch.

It winds its way through him like wire, digging in at the edges, constricting his breathing to something tight and sharp, and he doesn't realise he's yelling until he is, hours later, in the middle of a trauma room.

"Is it ... is it hubris or ignorance that makes you think you know more than other residents that have two to three years more experience and have helped thousands more patients in the emergency department than you have? Not to mention the over-five-hundred hours of advanced training with lectures and simulation labs with senior faculty instruction."

Santos stands in front of him, chin raised and eyes defiant, and he's never wanted more to shake someone to make them understand.

This isn't a joke. This *isn't a joke*. There is so much at stake.

"Stupid or arrogant, you need to realise that you are a beginner, which means your job is to shut up, listen, and learn, because so far today, the only thing you have been successful at is proving *repeatedly* that you know nothing."

A blink later and he's standing in the corridor and Robby is shouting at *him*.

He doesn't hear the words, he doesn't know what's being said, but he knows the tone.

"Please don't send me home."

"Send—what?" Robby frowns, confused and stopped short by it. A hint of doubt enters his eyes and Langdon does his best not to flinch back. "What are you talking about? Hey, where's your other one, where's Mel?"

He doesn't know and it panics him, his eyes darting around the ER, breathing picking up. "I—I don't know."

He should know. He should, he has to, he's been here before, he should know where she is, but the image of bloodied gowns and slipping feet fills his mind and the sound of a gunshot crackling through empty space, and he's walking before he knows where.

A hand on his arm holds him in place. Robby stares at him like he's grown a second head, and there's suspicion there, he doesn't even have to look hard to find it.

"You're senior leadership here," Robby tells him. "You need to get your head on straight."

"It is," he promises, and he's released in order to find Mel.

She's in the breakroom, sitting with the dog in front of her and her hands buried in its fur, and he sits with her for a long minute. They both breathe, and Mel seems to know that he doesn't want to talk because she stays silent but makes room on the dog's back for his hand too.

"You ready?" he asks her finally.

"For what?"

"I've got about a thousand pieces of gravel that need to be picked out of a man's leg."

"A thousand?" Her eyes light up and he smiles, properly this time.

"Yeah. Give or take a hundred."

They help each other to their feet, and the day goes on.

He only knows it's ending when he's at the nurse's station, timeless and waiting for the next thing to hit, chewing on the end of a pen trying to remember each of the MCI patients he saw after he'd come back part way in and if any of them could've been helped by more timely intervention. It hurts to remember the failures, but he drags them out anyway and puts them on paper.

"You got a sec?"

Langdon glances up. Robby stands, hands on the counter, watching him.

"For you, boss, I've got two." He gets to his feet, mind still running over the list like a tongue prodding at a loose tooth. "What's up?"

Wait.

Wait, he knows this. He *knows* this.

The words had come forward with ease but he doesn't have any more of them now.

He follows Robby into the locker room and sees Santos slink by before the door closes behind them.

Langdon grips the stethoscope around his neck like a noose.

"You've been irritable today," Robby begins. "More than usual."

Langdon shrugs. "So what, it's the ER, everyone's irritable."

"You've crossed the line with multiple people."

"Is this about Santos? Robby, what did she tell you?"

"This isn't about—"

"Or Garcia? She's the one excusing the new intern's basic mistakes, and if I hadn't been there, the patient would've died."

"You're jittery and unfocused too, and I've watched you make some rash decisions."

"Decisions that *saved* patients' lives." Because he knows better than any of them, he's done this all before. That should count for something, even if he can't say it. Even if he can't tell anyone without getting Psych involved.

"So you made the right decision," Robby snaps. "Congratulations. That doesn't mean it's always going to be that way, and that is why we *wait*. For evidence, for labs, for something to guide us on what to do."

"You go without labs all the time!"

Robby holds up a finger and closes his eyes. His other arm is wrapped around his waist like he's holding himself together. "That's different —"

"How is it different? I'm a *fucking good doctor*, and you know it."

"Langdon," Robby warns. "Is there something I need to know?"

"I'm *fine*, Robby." He can't stress this enough. His skin is tight with the need to leave, to get back on the floor. If all Robby called him here for was a welfare check, he's fine, really, and there are patients he could be helping.

"That's not what I'm asking."

"You think I don't know what you're asking? Where the hell is this coming from? I've been fine all day, I just—I just haven't had much sleep. But then, what's new?"

Robby sighs and opens his eyes. "You think I don't know how to recognise when something's going on?" His face, before concerned, hardens with something Langdon doesn't understand. "Open your locker, Frank."

That's fine, he hasn't taken—

Fuck.

The benzos, he'd taken them before Robby had arrived, back on the first day, and had stashed them in a sandwich bag while no one was around. He'd forgotten, he hadn't removed them—

"You can either take a mandatory drug test or you can open that locker."

He knows what it'll look like, and his mouth is moving before he realises he's opened it.

"Robby, it's not what you think. You remember, when I helped my parents move, I was too cheap to pay for movers? I hurt my back, I told you that. You teased me about it, remember?" He remembers well, and he remembers how much Abby had had to pester him to overcome that teasing and see a doctor. "Well, our own Doctor Hagan prescribed me some pain meds and muscle relaxants. I was just weaning myself off, that's what this is, it's just withdrawal, they were for maintenance, I'm *done*—"

"Stop." It's the voice Robby uses with the worst of his patients' families, the ones where they fight and argue in treatment rooms and risk the life of their sick relative for wills and inheritances. "Now."

"Please, Robby, you have to believe me—"

"Open your locker."

He's never been anything less than obedient when it comes to Robby.

He punches in the code. The locker opens.

Robby finds the pills like he did last time, and the remnants of Langdon's life here at the hospital are scattered across the floor.

He leaves.

And he returns, much as he did the first time, his footsteps having never crossed the property boundaries of the hospital and instead lingering at the edges of the footpath like a spectre calling and calling and calling because he knows what's coming. He *knows*, and he wants to warn them, he wants to prepare them, he wants to be taken back and for this rift to be mended, and so he calls and calls until finally he is told that they need everyone they can get to help.

He can help. He's good at helping. And if he can't fix this thing between him and Robby—if he can't fix the way the librium makes him feel like he can finally breathe again—he can fix this.

"You're here!"

"In the flesh. What do you got?"

It's easy, moving from patient to patient, easier almost than having the normal ED waiting room open to the public. He understands why Abbot thrives in environments like this. He thinks he does too. There's something about the rush and the immediacy of it, the way he has to make decisions and take risks, that settles him in a way nothing else does.

But then McKay's ankle monitor starts beeping and the paramedics are shouting something and the officers start forward with wide eyes and Robby is raising his hands and—

A gunshot.

He's standing in the middle of the ED.

The clock on the board tells him it's just before seven in the morning, but the kid, David, he'd been with them, he'd been under a 72-hour

psychiatric hold, he hadn't *been* to Pittfest—

“Where’s my overly obnoxious ‘good morning’?”

Langdon ignores Collins and heads straight to his locker and then the bathroom, flushing each of the pills down the toilet.

But the librium is back in his locker before the next hour is up, and this time Robby barely even looks surprised.

Another gunshot.

It’s not just gunshots as it turns out.

He slips on the blood instead of the reporter, going down in a heap.

Someone spins with the paddles too fast and shocks him in the chest.

Dana drags him in after the Kraken awakens and he gets kicked in the head hard enough that he can’t see out of one eye. It’s only much later that they even realise he was haemorrhaging.

Someone catches him with a needle in the arm. He’s not sure what was in the syringe, but it works slowly, too slowly, and he watches blurry faces above him for some time before everything goes black.

A hundred and fifty thousand people die each day, and he keeps being one of them.

The deaths are getting earlier too, and he almost prefers those ones. He can only handle the betrayal in Robby’s eyes so many times, the sound of the doors closing behind him and the silence of the outdoors without the ED rush, because no matter how many times he removes the drugs from his locker, they reappear like some warped sense of divine justice.

After a while, it’s almost comical.

After that, it’s nauseating.

And so it begins again.

The thing about some types of defibrillation is, the patient's heart has to still be beating. Not in the right rhythm admittedly, but beating nonetheless. The shock stops and restarts the heart in the hope that it will get back to its normal rhythm when it comes back.

It's a correction in the middle of a heartbeat-loop, a muted-life-to-death-to-life-again, a turn-it-off-and-back-on-again, and some warped circle of the way life works—and god, he wants his life back.

“What's with you today? You seem off.” Collins frowns at him, suspicious, and it irritates him as much as he knows it's deserved.

“Do I?” he mutters under his breath. “Mel, you're with me.”

Robby looks between them where he stands beside the other newcomers. “You two know each other?”

“Yeah, when you, uh ...” The words had been automatic, because Mel is always with him no matter the loop, and now he flounders. “Didn't you ... introduce us?”

Robby smiles but shakes his head, and Langdon can tell he's pleased.

The stolen ambulance accelerates instead of reverses, and it takes Langdon down as he's calling Robby for the sixth time, thumb still hovering over the screen. He feels metal compress around him, and then a burning in his back until he feels nothing at all.

He catches her before they even reach the first patient.

“You,” Langdon says, under his breath, still reeling from the feeling of being thrown to the concrete. “I don’t know what you’ve done, but whatever it is, it’s not funny.” Hallucinogens, possibly, or something that’s truly fucked up his brain for the first time since med school.

Santos blinks at him.

“Do I know you?” she asks, as if she doesn’t know him. As if she doesn’t know what she’s said. As if she doesn’t know what she’s *done*.

“You’re trouble,” he hisses, leaning in close, watching for Robby out of the corner of his eye as he tries to avoid drawing suspicion. Santos’ face is pale, her eyes wide and scared. “I know it. Robby’s going to know it. And don’t you forget it.”

He doesn’t know *exactly* what it is she’s done, but he knows it’s her, he knows it’s *something*, and until he fixes it, he’s going to keep her exactly where he can see her.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she stutters.

“Well, great,” he tells her. “Just stay out of my way.”

She doesn’t and he’s out by lunch.

It seems there is no way out of here. Instead, he is being forced to face what is turning out to be the worst string of days in his entire life.

He staggers, hand pressed against the glass door.

“Hey,” says Robby, ducking forward to look him in the eye. “You good?”

“Yeah. Yeah I’m—”

“Because we need you out there.” It’s the intensity he’s never been able to deny, a leash around his neck connecting him to those that need him and those that know he needs to be needed.

“They’d better be fratboys,” he mutters to Dana, scribbling ‘fratboys’, ‘crash’, and ‘in catchment’ on post-it notes. He knows they will be. The ambulance is still on the loose and the TVs in the back rooms show the helicopter footage, and if he had to suffer through being caught under their wheels, he’s gonna win some money from it.

For everything he’s done, Abby deserves the Birkin—or a vacation, if Dana is right. He’ll give her the money, let her choose. He can look after the kids for a week.

If he ever makes it out of this hell.

Doug, the asshole from the waiting room who punched Dana, decides not to go after Dana at all, and instead drives his red fucking truck right into the doors of the ambulance bay.

Langdon doesn’t know if it’s intentional or not that he gets hit, the person who pretty much told Doug to get fucked in the reception area, but he’s not conscious for long enough to think of anything further than *another fucking MVC*.

Death, many times over, isn’t enough to stop this nightmare, or at least that’s what he assumes given he went from being broken and bleeding from fucking *everywhere* to standing in front of the nurses’ station again.

The only thing that hurts now is his back, and if he’s going to get continually caught for having drugs in his possession anyway, he almost thinks that he might as well use them. He’s sick of his teeth grinding with every twist he makes, every movement, and the benzos will help. They’ll help.

At least then he’ll be feeling numb for a reason.

But he'd told Robby he hadn't ever worked while high, and he's not about to change that now.

He brings Mel in immediately, volunteering before Robby can open his mouth. He sees Robby's pleased look and smiles flatly in return.

You're senior leadership, Robby had told him. *Step up and act like it.*

"What do you think the chances are it's a demonic possession?" He's asking about the case but not really. Not really at all.

Dana doesn't even look up. "About the same as you going a whole hour without saying something stupid."

He grins because even in this loop, she's the same.

He's an ED doctor for fuck's sake, he's supposed to figure things out, notice details, treat symptoms and find the cause.

In that movie, the one with the groundhog and Bill Murray, the guy had to learn something, or do something, he can't really remember, but what he does know is that everything *he* tries to do only makes things worse.

"You're feeling upset? She's getting under your skin? Check yourself. Take a break. I've been watching you ride her. This kind of behaviour will not be tolerated. I don't want to see it."

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Sometimes he lasts until five and then six and then seven before Robby finds out, and then well into the MCI.

Sometimes he doesn’t last until lunch.

Santos looks at him with wide eyes on those days, and he wants to know what he’s done that makes it more obvious that his world is imploding.

“You’re on fire,” they tell him. “How are you figuring these cases out so quickly?”

He’s burning from the inside out.

“Robby, come on. You know me, Robby. You *know* me.”

“Doctor King, you’re with me.”

“You know my name?” She’s pleased and he can’t help but smile.

“I read your file. Very impressive work at the VA.”

“Oh.” The tips of her ears turn pink. “Thank you.”

The thing about being a doctor is that when he goes home—when they *all* go home—somewhere along their journey the dirtiness of humanity at their worst washes off. On the train, in the Uber, through the streets they pass.

It's inserting yourself into someone's life at their lowest and most afraid, and it rubs off on you. Some of it always sticks, the worst of it, and it wakes Langdon up at night knowing he could've done better, he could've done differently. It wakes him up looking for something he can't find anywhere other than in something to lessen the pain. In his back, in his head, wherever he wants.

They tell the med students when they first arrive that they are not gods, and then they spend years teaching them how to be just that. And the moment their hands slip for the first time, the moment they don't know the things they need to, the moment the tiredness catches up, they fall from heights they have been pushed to by praise and accolade.

They're only human.

Robby turns disappointed eyes to Langdon. "Go home."

"You have to believe me—"

"Go home, Frank." It sounds the same as when he was sent home the first time, only more disappointed somehow. He's letting Robby down in more ways than one.

"Mel, you okay?"

She doesn't look at either of them. "If you're done fighting."

"We're not fighting. This is playing." Garcia grins. "Langdon's too soft to fight."

“I don’t *need* help, okay?! I’m fine, I’m *fine*, there’s nothing wrong with me!”

Whitaker runs by in scrubs a size too small.

“He’ll be your patient.”

“What? Doctor Langdon, you—”

“Mel, you have a unique way of listening to people and seeing to what they really need, and I trust you. Also, there’s a note on Terrence’s file that says he’s autistic.” He opens the door. “Terrence, this is Doctor King, she’ll be looking after you.”

“Uh, Mr ... uh ... Terrence?”

“You’ll do fine.” He smiles at her, turns off the lights, and closes the door.

The Kraken wakes roaring, and minutes afterwards, there’s the strong smell of urine emanating from everyone who exits that room.

“Yeah, let’s get addiction services on the case too.” Robby doesn’t look

at Langdon as he says it, but Langdon glances over anyway, heart pounding in his chest.

“Don’t make me tell Robby you’re cherry-picking cases,” warns Dana with a slight smile.

“I’m not,” he replies shortly.

He’s picking the ones he knows so he can get to the ones he doesn’t sooner. He’ll know all the patients by name and birth-date by the hundredth restart. They won’t be patients anymore, they’ll just be a collection of symptoms.

He plants the librium on Santos only once. Only once to get Robby to send her home.

But Robby’s gaze as he nods at Langdon has something heavy behind it, and the way Santos looks at Robby like she’s resigned to it, like she doesn’t expect anything else, and Langdon doesn’t go near her locker again.

There’s something weird going on between Collins and Robby, and mid-afternoon he catches Collins wiping her eyes as she comes out of the bathroom.

Langdon opens his mouth to say something, to ask, but Dana shakes her head at him.

Whitaker runs by in a set of nursing scrubs.

He buys a handful of protein bars from the vending machine and puts them beside Collins as she charts. She raises an eyebrow but there's a small smile there, and he walks away.

She still emerges from the bathroom crying, but this time he sends in Dana to check on her.

The old man dies. He dies in most of them, when Langdon doesn't remember to check on him in the hallway.

Whitaker does compressions until everyone can hear a rib crack, and keeps going even then. Langdon doesn't have the heart to tell him the man isn't gonna make it. That he didn't make it the first day and hasn't made it most days since.

That's the thing about grief, it's not just that they're gone but it's also the loss of a future with them. *Their* future. You watch their life stop and your life has to keep on going.

From the moment he first walked through those doors, and every restart since, he has only ever been able to watch.

"Can you, um. Can you just put him on the phone for a second? I just want to hear his voice. There's my guy! How you doing, buddy? I would love to hear your ... your song."

He would hear it a thousand times if he could.

“Stop compressions.”

Whitaker removes his hands. There’s nothing.

“Call it.”

“But—”

“End of the line, Whitaker.” There’s sympathy in his voice, not as much as Whitaker deserves though.

But he’s been grieving them since before he ever met them, all of them.

Because the man’s fate had already been sealed. *All* of their fates have been sealed.

He wonders how many times he’ll see the same family members sobbing over the same relatives. He wonders if grief can only ever be a circle.

The second death always hits harder than the first. They don’t tell them that in med school, but it does.

The students are told that death happens, told that they’re going to be seeing people under paddles and with a screaming vitals monitor and at the exact moment fate has chosen for them to leave. But they’re not really anticipating it because it always seems to be a surprise. He’d had it himself with the death of his first patient, and he can see it on the faces of every student in scrubs walking through those doors. Because they might be told that they’re not gods, but every med student enters a hospital with an ego, acknowledged or not, checked or not, and there’s a naive hope in each of them before their first that they will be the one to be spared.

It hurts. He’s never said it doesn’t.

But it’s the second death that bites.

He’d heard it compared once to drowning by a doctor that grew up in

California and missed the surf.

The first wave, she'd said, hits with a crash and you're pushed over, pushed under, and it's a shock. You end up cold and wet and tumbled about, but your head breaks the surface with the help of your own hands and others and you vow you won't let yourself get knocked down again.

But the second wave comes while you are still reeling, and where the first was a shock, this one is desperation, clawing hands trying to reach for air because you are *drowning* and there hadn't been enough time in between to catch your breath, and slowly, slowly, the resignation starts to kick in. There aren't as many hands to help you up this time, and your own hands are tired. But there are waves and waves and waves, and you are trapped, breathless and suffocating under the water, and still you show up for work.

Langdon had taken Abby and Tanner to the beach once, back after Tanner had first learnt to walk and was running more than anything else, and the sand had been golden and the ocean had been bluer than Tanner's eyes, and there'd been seagulls nearby that had eyed them beadily until Tanner took great delight in chasing them away.

Abby had read her book on the sand and he'd promised to watch Tanner, both of them darting along the edges of the waves in a race. But he'd been winning and had turned back to celebrate, only to find no trace of his son.

It had been only a second, less than a second even, before he'd realised Tanner had started trundling back up the sand towards where Abby sat on a towel, but he had never been so afraid.

Tide goes in. Tide goes out. And still the waves come.

It's a vinegar-type of bitter on his tongue.

He watches the little girl die on the bed, her lungs still full of water. It was inevitable, he hears them mutter around the corners and down the hallways, or maybe that's just his own mind.

He's trapped and drowning, just like the little girl's sister was, and no

one's jumping in to save him.

He calls Abby. His kids. Abby again.

He's never taken his own life before.

They call it that now, not 'committing suicide'. Something about making it sound less like a crime and more like a tragedy. Either way, one leads to more and more in the news, he knows that much because every time one gets reported, there's at least half a dozen in the ED the next day, desperately trying to breathe through drug overdoses or trying to keep their eyes open even though they've lost a quarter of their blood volume. He sees the parents there too, and the kids, the siblings and friends.

They always say they never saw it coming. No one ever does.

He wonders if this will be what stops the loop. If it'll be the end. Or if someone will find him in a bathroom stall, crumpled on the ground. He wonders if it'll be Robby. He wonders if it matters.

Maybe it'll hurry it up without having to get hit by a vehicle first. Maybe it'll be less painful, though pain is something he's used to by now.

Others might think he takes the benzos because he wants to but the tearing feeling in his back every time he stands up says otherwise. The consequences of his cheap attitude incurred a debt and he is still paying it off in every movement now. The benzos are just to keep the bailiffs away from his door for a little while longer.

The pills are warm in his hand.

He's never taken more than what he needs, only ever what he needs, but this is different.

He hopes it's faster this time, at least faster than the ambulance or Doug's truck. He hopes if they do have to find something in the bathroom that he'll be long gone by then.

The noises he's making are too high-pitched, too tightly wound.

He wants someone to come and find him. He wants someone to take the pills away from him and hold him together until he stops shaking himself into pieces.

He wants to go quickly.

There's no bouncing on his toes this time, no arms above his head, no glances to the door.

The moment of silence sticks to his skin.

It's peaceful in the ED for the first few minutes. It's always only ever the first few minutes, and then it descends into a storm that he thrives in, but today his legs tremble under him and he needs to gulp air that feels too thin in his throat.

The pills had tasted like ashes.

He was supposed to swallow them whole but he hadn't been able to resist biting down on one, his body's desperate attempt to stop him.

It hadn't made a difference.

"You're sitting here feeling like ... like maybe you're not up to it?"

Mel nods and it's small. "Yeah."

"Yeah. Been there. We've all been there." He looks at her and tells her the same thing he tells her in every one of these godforsaken loops.

"Mel, you're a sensitive person. This? This is a tough place for sensitive people. But we need them. Badly."

Please.

The dog licks his fingers.

“Uh, you okay?”

Robby glances up from the wash basin, eyes reddened at the edges. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Yeah, I’m good, I’m fine.” He pastes a smile on his face that even Langdon can see is fake, and pats his shoulder as he walks out.

“The contusion is high at the thyroid cartilage,” says Garcia, “so you just stand there and look pretty, ER Ken, and let me fix this.”

Langdon glances over and blinks. “Uh, yeah.”

Garcia frowns and it’s only then that he realises he’s missed something. But he follows Robby to the nurses’ station regardless, and Robby takes hold of his arm to pull him to the side.

“You’re not yourself today,” Robby tells him. “Do I need to be worried?”

Is he casting him out early? Has he already found out? Santos—no, she’s with Garcia, smiling and following along like a good little intern, and Robby is here looking like he does during the moment of silence.

“Do *I*?” Langdon asks.

Robby blinks, confused.

He considers going to the cafeteria and buying the first thing with salad he can find. If the pills won’t do it this time, the E.coli certainly will.

“Sorry.”

“You’re doing great. Take your time.” He glances at her. “You okay?”

“I am, yeah. I get frustrated when I can’t do things, or at least it looks like it.”

He wants to laugh but he knows she won’t understand why. “Yeah, you and me both.”

“Thanks, but my frustration manifests itself emotionally and then, uh, I get upset, and then it looks like I can’t handle things and, you know, then I can’t cry in front of the patient because no one wants to see their doctor cry. That’s just a big red flag.”

“Hardly. You continue to impress me.”

She smiles through a confused frown, eyes still wet. “I don’t know that I’ve done very much yet.”

“You just did a perfect crike. You’re doing great.” She doesn’t quite look at him directly, but the reassurance loosens the tension in her shoulders. “And it’s okay to cry, you know that, right? Maybe not in front of the patient, but it’s healthy. The shit we see here, it has to go somewhere. You’ve got to,” he sighs, “you’ve got to put it somewhere or it’ll get inside you and mess you up.”

“Where do you put it?”

He looks away, fingers lingering on the edge of his pocket.

“You can still work here with that?”

“You think I shouldn’t?” McKay stares at him and he can see it in her now, the woman who does what she can, *whatever* she can, and he knows that her son is in some of the best hands possible.

He wonders if he'll get an ankle monitor when this day finally comes to an end. He wonders if he'll be able to work too. He hasn't stolen anything directly since the very first loop, but he knows how easy it is to run a pharmacy audit. He knows what he's put in his pocket before today.

He wonders if his kids can still love a father with a chain around his ankle.

"A pain clinic, huh? What would you know about pain?"

Santos glares at him. "More than you."

For a moment he wonders what's happened to her to make her like this, the arrogance and the anger, but they're standing outside the doors to the hospital because she's only threatened to tell Robby instead of just telling him this time, and this time Langdon almost wants to listen.

"Those pills," Santos says, and her voice is carefully neutral. "What're they for?"

"Eating," he replies, because he can and because in a few hours, this conversation won't have existed.

He goes back inside and feels the burn of her stare on his neck.

"Cannabis gummies," he tells Mel. "CPS are on their way."

He leaves her open-mouthed behind him, and he hears the couple begin to scream at each other as he walks away.

He was right the first time he told her; they'll get a slap on the wrist, nothing more.

His pocket burns against his side.

Robby smiles at him through a gaze that is fixed somewhere beyond Langdon. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

The pressure to keep his mouth shut, to keep himself in line, to keep anyone from finding out that he knows something they don't—

The librium in his locker pales in comparison.

"Before you grab your next patient, uh, call Kiara. Have somebody go upstairs and talk to the wife."

Whitaker pauses. "Amy? Why?"

"We wanted to give her hope, but the reality is her husband's not gonna make it."

"He's stable."

"His chance of dying in the next week is over ninety percent." His chances of living through the night are astronomically worse. Langdon's seen the updates that'll arrive over the next few hours.

"He's young, he's strong. Maybe he's the ten percent."

He's not, he wants to say. None of us are.

"Maybe. But he's a lot more likely to die of sepsis before his kid is born." He can't save them. He can't even save himself. He wonders absently if he takes a scalpel to his own wrists whether he'll start to breathe too. "Call Kiara."

Robby can't save them either. None of them.

Maybe Langdon's imagining things, but with each restart, Robby's hands are tucked into his scrubs pockets more, his face shuttered, his gaze avoiding his staff.

Or maybe it was like that from the beginning, the way Robby's smile cracks from the moment he steps through the doors and the way his eyes constantly drift to the peds room.

It's like that ET movie he'd wanted to show Tanner a month or so ago. Abby had said firmly that it would scare him, but he'd shown Tanner anyway and there had been vicious tears, not at the alien itself but at the fact the alien was so far away from its family. Tanner had begged to know if his dad would come and get him if he ever got lost like that.

And his dad had promised.

He'd *promised*.

The pen is leaking, but he uses it anyway, writing out name after name after name. All the patients that have died already in another lifetime get an asterisk next to their name and suggested treatment and signs to watch for.

He finishes the list, puts it on Dana's keyboard, salutes Robby across the ED and gets a confused wave in return, and walks away.

He doesn't make it past the front doors.

“Abbot’s not going to be happy you’re in his spot.”

Langdon stares at the skyline.

“He said you can get pizza delivered up here if you tip enough though. Beer too. Something about one of the delivery guys earning a few extra bucks for all those stairs.” Robby hums. “He spends far too much time here.”

Langdon shrugs. “It seems kinda peaceful.”

They mellow in the silence.

“Frank, are you okay?”

Langdon looks over at Robby where he stands behind the railing. “Are any of us?”

A small penguin figurine is placed on Dana’s desk next to the photo of her daughter.

“You’ve seen what I do, Robby,” he tries to persuade him. “Could a drug addict do what I do?”

“I can see three other patients while you do.”

He doesn’t.

He lingers just outside the door, smiling and nodding at those who pass but keeping his attention on the two people inside. He doesn’t intrude this time, only watches and listens as best he can through almost-soundproof walls, and he can see the patient relax under her care.

She's good. Better than he is for sure. He's seen what she can do.

"Retrograde intubation, that's an Adamson special. I learned that from the best."

"Well, you're not too shabby yourself, Professor." He wants to roll his eyes because this is the Robby he knows, the one who teaches with a calm head, who encourages learning, who treats every interaction like an opportunity. He's missed it, and he looks forward to this moment every day, even if it's bittersweet.

It's the one time that Robby looks at him properly and sees what he can be.

"Yeah, that got kinda rough in there. You kept your composure though." Robby hums. "Exactly the kind of candidate they want for the ED Medical Education Fellowship."

"Oh, there's probably over fifty applicants for that one slot." He knows there's more. He's checked.

"Yeah, probably. But I know that they like to go with someone that they know from first-hand experience has the skills to be successful." Robby shrugs. "At least that's what I told them in my letter of recommendation."

Fists are held out for him to bump, and wiggled when he hesitates.

But he's never denied Robby this.

Thanks isn't enough.

"You let me down. You let everybody down, especially yourself."

“Mr Pernell, you are in luck. If I had to have gravel meticulously picked out of my leg,” he points to Mel, “this is the person I’d call. Doctor Mel King, detail specialist.”

She grins and ducks her head, and he smiles because he can’t help it. She is the hope in the midst of his aching days that perhaps not everything he tries to do is tainted.

He opens the locker. A rat stares up at him.

Sometimes he thinks Robby’s trapped in some sort of loop too.

Robby, who communicates with his hands and his eyes just as much as his words, walks around the floor with his hands in his pockets and his head ducked as if waiting for a blow. The look in his eyes veers far away, seeing to something else, something past and something future and avoiding the present like it has teeth. Especially when those kids say goodbye to their father.

Langdon’s been in the peds room before. It holds ghosts for most of them.

“Whatever you do,” he tells Santos, “do *not* put him on BiPAP. Actually, you know what? Mel, this is now your patient.”

“My ...?”

“Yes, your patient. And you, you’re with me. You might finally learn something, bright spark.”

Figures since he's repeating this again and again, he might as well teach her something. He can only hope it'll stick long enough that he doesn't need to teach her again.

Santos is intelligent, he'll give her that, even if she takes his instructions like she's swallowing a lemon.

He's got the small-space dance with Mel down to perfection now. He can anticipate how she'll move in the treatment rooms, how she moves in the corridors, and he glances back sometimes as she misses hitting the tops of the doorways they pass through, if only to allow himself a smile at least once in those loops.

Whitaker walks by in a hospital gown and socks.

"You're ... you're obviously really good at helping people. You're crushing it with your patients. You even taught me a couple of things."

She smiles, shy and tentative but willing to believe him. "Really?"

She's looking at Robby with tired eyes, IO drill in hand, as the man fights to save a bleeding teenage girl.

Please, he thinks, please run.

"For sure." He does his best to smile in return. "You're making a great first—first impression."

Jake shows up and Langdon pulls him into a hug that lasts longer than it usually does.

“Don’t go to Pittfest,” he says.

“But I’ve already got the tickets—”

“Please. Sell the tickets, I’ll buy them off you, just don’t go.”

“My girlfriend—”

“Leah will be fine with it, I promise.”

Jake leans back, eyes narrowing. “I didn’t tell you her name.”

“Read the fucking room, mom!” It’s the young one, Javadi, and her mother, Doctor Eileen Shamsi, and a friction between two people that he recognises from his own family.

He wonders what it would be like to work with his mother peering over his shoulder at his every move. He wonders what it would be like to watch Tanner covered in blood.

The people around them go silent.

Doctor Shamsi opens her mouth and quickly closes it again.

He hears her scream not long after the gunshot.

“Can you wake up for me, Tanner?”

“Tyler. His name is Tyler.” The boy blinks blearily on the bed.

“Right. Right, Tyler, sorry.”

“It’s not that I’m telling you to take a back seat.” Dana watches him from across the coffee pot. “I’m just saying, you’re not the type to sit and watch the world fall apart without doing something about it, is all.”

He can fix this. He *can*.

“Open your locker.”

He can see the hope dying in Robby’s eyes.

“What’re you doing?”

“Bulk ordering O-neg ... and chest tubes.” He clicks send and the order is logged.

There won’t be a response for a while, and it’ll be confused when it comes through, but at least the other hospitals will be alerted early. Someone on the other end can start packing blood before they’re told to wait for confirmation, and by the time the official call goes through as patients start pouring through the doors of The Pitt, they’ll already be half packed.

Yeah, I’ve been stealing blood too, he’d told Robby sarcastically. The irony kicks him in the stomach.

Dana pushes past him. “You can’t do that.”

“I just did.”

“Get him in.”

“We have a triage system—”

“Just ...” Langdon holds up his hands and ducks his head, “trust me.”

Doug stands from the waiting room seat when his name is called, looking relieved.

Early treatment doesn’t change anything but the punch, but it’s easier to look Dana in the eyes knowing they haven’t been bruised.

“Where’s this puppy you keep telling me about, huh? I want photos of Tanner actually looking—”

“Don’t,” he snaps. “Don’t talk about my kids.” He doesn’t want to be reminded. He doesn’t want to wonder how long this loop will last until he can see his kids again. *If* he’ll see his kids again.

The drawing on the inside of his locker is removed with trembling fingers.

He rubs his thumb against each of the letters on his bracelet like a rosary.

Dana follows him into the bathroom where he shakes and shivers as he kneels on the floor, head tipped over the toilet.

“What have you eaten today? Apart from the Red Bulls I saw you finishing earlier.”

Langdon shakes his head. “Nothing. I can’t—I can’t keep anything down.” It wrenches in him, his heart pounding in his ears and against the back of his throat. “I can’t keep doing this,” he says through gasps.

“I can’t—”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Dana says. She pats his back, the same place as Robby does when he’s pleased, the heat of her hand burning a hole through his scrubs. “It’s gonna be okay. Shift’s almost over.”

His bag is crumpled in his hands, shoes tenuously balanced on top. His stethoscope dangles almost to the floor. His hospital ID card is still attached to his scrubs.

And he’s going.

Robby had told him to go and he’s going. His bag is in his hands, his hospital ID card still attached, and he’s going.

And this time he doesn’t intend to come back, not for Robby, not for the patients, not even for Mel.

He just—

He needs a second to breathe.

Mel runs up to him.

“I watched a birth.” She sounds so proud of herself and he remembers what that was like, being desperate to share something like that with someone. He thinks of Abby, he thinks of their kids, and he thinks of how he used to look at Robby with wide eyes whenever something went wrong or something went so right it was like he was flying.

“That’s awesome!” He can muster excitement for her. No one else. He goes to high-five her, and makes a face at the streaks of colour on her wrist.

Mel notices and rapidly lowers her hand. “Sorry, I didn’t realise—the fluids—”

“Mel, I have two kids,” Langdon says with a smile. He high-fives the retracted hand. “And I’m an emergency doctor. A bit of placenta doesn’t bother me.”

Mel blinks. “You have kids?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I mean, a lot of emergency doctors have families, but I know the lifestyle doesn’t necessarily lend well to being present with family.” He knows she’s thinking of her sister.

“It’s hard,” he tells her. “There’s no escaping that. But,” he looks at her intently, ducking a little so he can see her face, “it’s doable.”

There’s relief in her eyes.

“Fuck this. *Fuck this!*”

He can’t keep going through this, he can’t, this look in Robby’s eyes of profound disappointment.

He doesn’t open his locker and instead storms through the doors, disappearing outside so that he can stare up at the sun.

Santos pulls Robby aside right before the gunshot victims arrive, and when Langdon’s directed into the hallway, he can see the debate in Robby’s eyes, deciding whether it is worth putting off the betrayal until after they get through this, until after the *patients* rapidly filling the ED get through this.

“Please,” he begs him. He knows what’s coming. “You need me here.”

Robby has never needed him enough to make up for the drugs needing him more.

He lets Santos take out the reporter each time. Each time it gets funnier.

The man's phone never makes it past the nurses' station.

"What about the OD, Nick Bradley?"

"Robby wants a few more tests. He's stable and on a vent."

"Dana, they need to make a decision. *Robby* needs to make a decision. We can't keep him here, we need that bed." He sighs. "The hope he's giving to those parents—I know Robby thinks he's helping—"

"He *is* helping," Dana snaps, whirling around to face him. "He's helping those two people. They're in there right now praying over their dead son." She pauses and her voice softens to sadness. "They just haven't let their hearts accept it yet."

He can't say anything else.

Robby's sleeve rolls up.

Amor fati. Love your fate.

Me too, he wants to say to the man in the bed with the scans on the screen. But he can't, and Robby doesn't like it when he marches into the room and points at the patient, says, "You've got a worm graveyard in your brain."

Langdon laughs until he's sick outside the ambulance bay doors

anyway.

It doesn't make him feel any better.

"Robby thinks I'm a drug addict."

Dana looks at him, and for a moment, there's a hint of Robby in her eyes. "Are you?"

No.

Yes.

Maybe.

He doesn't know, but what he *does* know is that he's scared. He's scared of what's going to happen next, of what's going to happen at the end of all this.

He's scared of what's going to happen before the end too, because until now, he's never made it past the MCI.

"It's not coffee. It's bourbon." Jake looks at him and a single tear trickles down his cheek. Langdon doesn't think he's even aware of it. "That was a joke. Hey, Robby did everything he could to save your girlfriend. If he couldn't save her, nobody could."

If he can't save me, he thinks, no one can.

If he can't save himself—

"I'm sorry, okay?" he screams, fingers digging into his hair, into his head, burrowing inside to find out where it's all gone wrong and dig

the growth out in bloody and visceral detail before it can get any bigger, before it can get any worse. “I’m sorry for being in pain and for needing these! I’m sorry for taking them! I’m sorry for fucking up again and again and again!”

Robby rears back like he’s been slapped.

The metal panel on the exit door is cold against Langdon’s hands. He doesn’t even have to be asked.

“Yeah, but we’re still friends, right?” he asks.

Robby looks at him for a long moment and there’s a flicker in his eyes that makes Langdon believe just for a second that Robby remembers, before it’s gone.

“Not if this conversation goes on much longer.”

This isn’t a joke, he’d wanted to tell Santos, but with the drugs getting pulled out of his locker again and again and again, he can’t help but wonder who it is that’s laughing.

There shouldn’t be a shooter in the ED. There hasn’t been any of the other times he’s made it this far.

Sure, he’s heard the gunshot so many times now that it rings in his ears, but he hadn’t actually thought ...

It’s not David either, though he knew that already, or Doug, though Doug would be far more deadly with his driving. It’s just some kid, unhappy with the way his life has gone, and he’s picked up a gun to do something about it.

And now the end of that gun's moving from target to target in the middle of the ED until it lands on Robby.

Langdon pushes his way forward, desperate to have it pointing somewhere else, to have it pointing at *him* instead, but the movement draws the shooter's attention.

The gun goes off.

He isn't fast enough and Robby bleeds under his hands, and he runs, shoving past Abbot, ignoring the calls after him.

He swallows each librium pill one by one and sits with his back against the ambulance bay walls until his limbs start to go numb and the sky fades to grey, and there's the sound of the doors opening and someone shouting his name, but he's a doctor and he knows when it's too late.

All this time it had never been him. It had never been him, it had always been—

Gunshot.

It had never been his death.

He'd thought that, originally, with the pills in his hand or the feeling of electricity burning its way through his skin before his heart gave out.

But the Pittfest shooter must've gone in with his gun anyway, and it had never been *his* death that had reset the loop.

He'd just never been around to see the one that had.

He moves to stand by the place the shooter enters, but the loop changes and this time it's a different kid, a different gun, a different position in the room that he can't reach in time.

The loop is fucking with him, forcing him to lose and lose and lose, and he wonders how many times it'll watch him lose before it decides the game isn't worth it.

You can't save him, it tells him through the blood on his hands, the blood pounding in his veins. *You can't save him. You're letting him die instead. You're letting him down.*

Always, always letting him down.

"This isn't a joke, Frank! You're playing with your patients' lives, you're playing with your own life—"

Is it weird to wear a bulletproof vest to work in the hospital?

He starts looking up how many he can order in bulk, and when Dana gives him a strange look, he shakes his head at her.

"This is a new low," she says. "Going to piss off a patient bad enough to get shot?"

She has no idea.

He gets in his car to drive to Pittfest, right after he wakes up in the middle of the ER, but he has no ticket and no matter how many times he argues, they don't let him onto the grounds. Not even after the shooting starts.

Robby's sleeve rolls up.

Memento mori. Remember that you will die.

"Please, just *put it on!*"

Robby stands, bemused at the situation more than anything, as Langdon tries to convince him.

He puts on the vest eventually, eyes wary and starting to lose patience, and fends off Gloria with talks about demonstrating safety.

The shooter gets him in the neck anyway.

Gunshot.

Gunshot.

Gunshot.

All of these loops, all of this time, and he's always too late.

“We do these debriefs to try to give closure, meaning, to the difficult cases so that they won’t linger. But trust me, the kids you’ll lose will linger.”

They’re gonna lose so many kids.

“So what do you do? I did my residency at Big Charity in New Orleans. And day one, I got a kid, five-year-old boy, accidentally shot by his brother playing with his dad’s gun, worried he was gonna get in trouble right up until he coded and died.”

There are so many gunshots.

“That night, I asked myself, like, what do I do with this kid? Where do I put this feeling?”

He doesn’t know.

“You’re not the only one tired here,” Santos snaps as she passes him.

She hasn’t discovered the drugs this time but they’ve fucked each other over in different ways, his frenetic energy clawing at the edges of the loop, and her suspicious mind driving him to distraction.

He doesn’t even look at her. He has nothing left to give.

The reach is automatic by now, hand out, fingers wrapping around the grip, barrel turned upwards, and thank god the kid hadn’t brought in anything bigger than can fit between his hips and his throat as he crouches next to—

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” It’s Santos that grabs at him. Her yell has heads turning, and then Collins is lunging at him and Abbot has him pinned to the ED floor, lying across his chest, and Langdon’s

crying even as he's smiling.

"It's fine," he tells them, "it's fine, it'll all go back to normal."

He's trying to be reassuring, but his eyes keep darting to Robby on the floor next to him, blood running from his chest, his gaze fixed on the ceiling even as his breaths slow. There's no point, Langdon knows that much. There's no point. Nobody's covered him with a sheet yet. Nobody's had the time.

Langdon heaves and is rolled onto his side.

"I've already lost him," growls Collins from behind him, "I'm not losing anyone else!"

Two senior staff members, gone in one day.

Langdon doesn't blame her for the way her fingers dig into his shoulder joints. He likes Collins. They all do. She's a good doctor and a better person, better than Langdon and maybe even better than Robby. She deserves her dignity, and instead she's here, eyes blinking back tears even as she's calling out instructions to the rest of them gathered around Robby.

"We need the restraints," calls Abbot, but there's a noise from the other side of the ED and they both turn to look, and Langdon makes his move.

He doesn't ask for Collins to stay late again.

He stumbles as he passes the nurses' station when he forgets to eat anything and has filled himself with at least three Red Bulls, maybe four, he's lost count, he's lost count of all of them—

There's a warm hand on his back.

"You okay?" The voice is familiar but less cracked than he last heard it, whispering to a deity that Langdon doesn't know in the middle of the ED floor.

"Yeah," he replies, and they both ignore the breathlessness in his voice. "Yeah, 'm good."

Blood soaking through the knees of his scrubs. The smell of metal. A ringing in his ears even now that makes him flinch.

He can't even *look* at Robby. At *Doctor Robinavitch*. He can't even—

Robby pats his back. "Tell me if you aren't." And then he's gone, off to another case.

Langdon doesn't think he can open his mouth without blood pouring out.

Gunshot.

Gunshot.

Gunshot.

Gunsh—

"Stop!"

The staff freeze, everyone except Langdon who has seen this before.

He's tired. He's *so fucking tired*.

"Stop, or I'll—I'll start shooting."

Robby puts his hands up and takes a step forward. Langdon wants to tell him not to bother. It won't make any difference. "We have patients in here—"

"Yeah, I can see that."

It's just a kid. It's just some stupid kid, not even old enough to be out of high school, and he's trying to sound tough like he has all the times before. He's got his dad's gun in his hands, and his aim is steady.

"Robby," Langdon says in a whisper, but it's half-hearted at best.

This is how it always goes. He's resigned himself by now to watching it play out. He's only got another minute before he'll be gone, before they'll *both* be gone, and Robby hasn't let him interfere any of the other times the loop has gotten this far either.

Robby flicks his gaze to him and glares, before returning it to the kid. "What is it you want?"

It's just wasting time at this point. Milling about in the in-between, both of them walking dead men.

Langdon brushes his fingers over the edge of his pocket. He doesn't know how much longer he can stomach these scenes.

The kid rolls his shoulder forward. Blood is soaking through the sleeve of his jacket, turning the grey material a mottled brown. It seems law enforcement managed to get a shot off this time, even if they were useless about bringing the kid in. "This is a hospital, right?"

"Right."

"And you treat patients? No matter what they've done?"

Oh, *this* is new.

Abbot, standing on the other side of the patient next to Langdon, steps forward in a jerky motion. Robby waves him down. The lines beside his eyes grow even tighter, but he continues to slowly move closer to the kid.

"We do. Do you need medical treatment?"

The kid nods and looks around the ED. Langdon wants to ask what he's looking for. He isn't sure he wants to know.

"Her," the kid announces finally. "I want her to treat me."

No.

If he's done one good thing in any of these loops, it's meeting Mel. Helping her. Training her. He'd thought he'd been training her for—

But it had never been his death.

And now it had better not be hers either.

"Don't let her," Langdon warns under his breath, but he's ignored.

“Doctor King,” Robby beckons with one of his raised hands, “would you come join me and the patient please?”

The kid frowns. “Not you as well.”

“Let me help her,” Robby says. It’s as close as Langdon has ever heard the man get to begging, even with Leah’s blood on his hands. Even with all of their patients’ blood on his hands, staring into a future without them. “Please.”

The whole ED watches in silence, both the staff and the patients. Everyone is swallowing their fear.

Langdon can see how much Robby needs to help. He can see how much Mel needs him to help her. He doesn’t want that gun anywhere near either of them.

A chair from the nurses’ station is pulled up and the kid sits in it, his gun still roaming the room with the vigilance of a person coming to the end of an adrenaline rush. It’s like the perversion of a zoo, the predator in the middle and the rest of them watching carefully, only the rest of them are trapped in here with him.

Mel inserts in an IV with fingers that can be seen shaking from across the room.

The kid flinches.

Those closest to the barrel of the gun flinch too.

Mel hangs a bag of blood and Robby cuts through the kid’s sleeve with trauma shears, both of them taking a careful look.

Compared to the injuries he’s caused, the cut is less than minor.

Antiseptic. Stitches. IV fluids. Back home by bedtime.

Langdon knows the drill as well as any of them.

One by one, the staff return to their patients, starting quietly and gradually growing noisier as they realise the gun is pointing elsewhere.

Langdon doesn’t want to know how many have suffered in the time between the kid’s arrival and now. How many are dead because of this delay, not only the gunshots. How many more the kid has killed through his behaviour in the hospital, not only on the field at Pittfest.

Robby would know though. Robby always knows. He guarantees the man is counting down the seconds in heartbeats and breaths.

Whispers begin to rumble behind him.

We escaped the festival and now he's here?

They thought they were safe. They thought the worst had passed.

"Langdon," he hears Abbot say from somewhere close by, and his head snaps around. He's been staring at Robby, staring at Mel, watching as they are trapped as the showpieces in the centre of a room swimming in blood and grief.

"Hey." There's a hand on his arm, fingers squeezing tightly. "Head in the game."

Langdon shakes off the hand. Shakes his head. Nods his head. Doesn't take his eyes off Robby.

As if on some unheard signal, once again the ED goes silent.

"There," Robby is saying. "You've been treated. Now put down the gun."

"Nope."

"Kid—"

"Jake."

Robby flinches bodily. Hell of a coincidence, that name.

Langdon knows for a fact the real Jake, the Jake he knows and cares about, hasn't arrived yet. Maybe he won't arrive at all. Who knows how this loop will turn out. They're still at the beginning of the influx if there is much of an influx at all considering the shooter has left the scene. Maybe this will be the one that has a number of victims that they'll be able to handle.

Maybe this time Leah will live.

Maybe this time they all will.

"We can't let you leave."

"You can't do anything to stop me." Jake raises the gun.

"You walk out that door, it'll be open fire," Robby says, and Langdon watches as the kid considers it.

"Okay, who's in charge here?"

"I—"

"Me." Langdon's already calling across the ED before Robby can open his mouth. He steps forward, raising his hands as the shooter swivels the gun to point at him. He ignores Abbot's hissed protests just as Robby ignored his. "I am."

"He's a senior resident," Robby begins, shaking his head minutely at Langdon over the shooter's shoulder, and Langdon ignores him too.

Not this time. He can't watch it this time. He's let Robby down already a thousand times; he can't let him die for it too. He's been stuck in these loops, given foreknowledge and forewarning, and still he's failed again and again, to prevent this, to prevent getting caught, to change his behaviour, all of it. And while he can't do anything to make it up to the first Robby or any Robby since, he can do something for this one.

This time, he *can* do something.

"I'm a senior resident, he's just an attending." For the uninitiated, the two terms could be labels on a pizza for all the sense they make, and he prays absently that the shooter doesn't know anything about hospital hierarchies.

"*Senior* attending," Robby objects, "he's my junior—"

"Why do you look so young then?"

"Because I'm smart. Smarter than everyone else." Langdon waves a hand across the staff, the ones that know him best. He's asking more of them than he should, more than they should ever be asked in a hospital when they've come in to save lives, but he is asking nonetheless. "Ask anyone here."

Silence.

"He's right," a voice says from his side.

Santos steps forward. Her eyes meet his and, for the first time since they've stepped foot in this hospital together, time and time and time

again, they're finally on the same page.

Langdon blinks, surprised.

He should be offended, shouldn't he, that she's helping to sell him out to the kid with a gun, but he can't help but be grateful. So *fucking* grateful. Because they might dislike each other, hate each other even in some of the loops, but they're two asshole peas in a pod trying to protect someone that doesn't deserve to suffer.

"Residents outrank attendings," she continues. "Everyone knows that." Even faced with a bullet and she doesn't stop using her sharp tongue.

He smiles briefly and wonders if he'll get to thank her one day. He wonders if she'll remember saving Robby together in the next loop.

He wonders if she'll forgive him.

She might be a mouthy little shit who thinks she can be a hero, too cocky for her own good, too morbid and awkward around the patients to put them at ease, but she's only twenty-six, he's looked at her file, and that's what he'd been trying to tell her but he'd used the wrong words.

When the gun shifts to her, he steps in front.

"Me," he tells Jake. "Or nobody. Please." He's talking as quickly as he can, and he's trying to be reassuring but the world is beginning to spin faster and his breaths stutter on their way down his throat. He's done emergency surgeries before, held lives in his hands, but never this life. Never Robby. "It's all—it's all a mess, and I can fix this. I *can*. You've seen what I can do, I can get us both through this." He's talking to Jake but he's also talking to Robby, the man who has mentored him for years and is looking at him with wide eyes and a disbelieving expression. "I can fix this too. It'll be worth it, I promise."

He is begging like he has not begged for anything, not for his family when Abby looks at him on the mornings he takes more than he should, or his job when he stood outside the hospital doors with the contents of his locker in his arms, or every time he's seen Robby since, desperately trying to convince his friend that he's worth keeping despite the fuck-ups.

Jake scowls and says, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Abbot barks his name.

Mel mouths *No* and shakes her head frantically.

Robby looks like he did after Leah, and Langdon finally realises what that look in his eyes is. Devastation.

But it's no use, because the betting pool on the ambulance thieves has already finished, and Doug has gone home with clean knuckles, and he's misplaced the benzos, and the roof is a long way away, and this is the only way he's going to get his hands on that gun.

It'll be the last loop. Robby will live and he won't, and by now he's almost glad. Because if one of them has to go, here on the floor of this hospital, he wants it to be him.

"Dude," Jake says, "*shut up.*"

Which is crueler, he thinks, to make Robby watch or to watch Robby? He knows which Robby would prefer. He's known the whole day, in each of these iterations, he's seen the cracks and he can see the shattering coming, not with Leah this time but now instead with him.

But he's always been a selfish bastard and he can't watch anymore.

"Look after Mel," he tells Santos and her eyes grow wide but she nods and he owes her more than he can ever repay.

"Fine, whatever. This place is like some Grey's Anatomy shit anyway. You," Jake points at Langdon, "come with me."

Jake salutes with the gun and says "Hasta la vista, motherfuckers," like a cowboy, like some fucking *kid*, and Langdon sees the moment Robby steps forward, eyes panicked, and he sees the moment the gun tilts and slips in bloodied hands, and he moves forward in a rush—

A gunshot.

He isn't sure what happens next. Only that there's shouting and what sounds like half a dozen guns firing.

Something hits the ground next to him and his heart jumps in his chest, his breath catches in his lungs, but he can't turn his head, he can't look, he can't, he's failed, the loop will reset anyway, he's still on the floor but he can't watch, not this close, not Robby—

Santos hovers over him.

"You fucking loser," she says, and her voice shakes. "What, you

thought you could just push him out of the way like some sort of a hero?”

“Thanks,” he chokes out, “thank—”

She freezes, the first time he’s seen her freeze, properly at least and not because she’s dropped something sharp on Garcia’s foot.

He chuckles at the memory and something warm trickles down his cheek.

But then Santos is pushed to the side and Robby is there, shoving his hand into Langdon’s abdomen. “Frank? Can you hear me?”

There’s relief where there probably shouldn’t be, but it floods through him anyway, thick and heavy.

He latches shaking fingers around the strap of Robby’s watch.

“You need to,” he coughs, “you need to check ... my locker.” Air is tight in his lungs now. “I’m sorry, Robby. I’m sorry. I’m—”

Someone calls something above him and there are loud voices.

He pulls Robby’s arm closer.

He can never remember the rest, the parts of the ho’oponopono thing Robby talks about, but there’s only one that matters.

“F—forgive me.”

A cracking voice above him says, “*Jesus fucking Christ*,” and it’s too high-pitched, it’s too splintered, and then there’s yelling, and his hands and feet are going numb again, and he’s falling with the taste of blood in his mouth instead of ashes.

“Sh'ma Yisra'eil, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad.

Baruch shem kavod malchuto.

l'olam va-ed.”

A beep from somewhere far away rouses him.

His limbs feel heavy, not like they usually do when he wakes up to beeping and fluorescent lights, and he wonders if the lack of food has finally caught up with him. Or maybe the lack of sleep, or the overwork, or the grief or whatever else his body has been put through in these past few days. These past *many* days. He lost count after the seventh month.

But it's shadowy when he opens his eyes.

For a moment he thinks he's in his bedroom and he reaches out to Abby.

The back of his hand strikes something cold.

Air catches in his lungs.

"Wh—" He chokes on his own dry mouth, and in an instant there is rustling and then a figure hovering beside him in the dim light.

"Here." Something cold slides between his lips and he swallows gratefully.

A long sigh answers his appreciation.

Langdon rolls his head to the side to see Robby settling back into the plastic chair beside the bed.

Even in the dim light, there's an obvious streak of red above his right ear, out of view of what would be seen in a mirror while cleaning up. Robby's eyes are glazed too, and bloodshot in a way Langdon has only ever seen when a patient tips over into the next life and takes something of Robby with them.

"You're awake."

He swallows again. Licks his lips. "Guess the shift finished?"

Has the shift finished? Is it even the shift he knows?

Robby nods. "Took a while but we got through."

“Oh,” says Langdon. He counts the tiles on the ceiling. He hasn’t been on the receiving end of treatment in years. Not since med school at least. “Did I ... do they need the bed?”

He hears Robby huff beside him, a sound somewhere between exasperation and a suppressed chuckle. “Don’t you even consider getting up. Garcia’s already on the warpath.”

“What happened?”

“What do you remember?”

Langdon makes a face. What *doesn’t* he remember? “Someone died.” It’s vague though, and there’s a lack of satisfaction in Robby’s eyes. “You?”

He remembers hearing a gunshot, and maybe Robby’s actually dead. They’ve all heard of the patients that see ghosts right before they die, and maybe that’s what they all are. Ghosts of the living. Ghosts of themselves. Haunting the hospital until they make ghosts of others.

Robby wipes a hand down his face. “I’d like to think in the afterlife I’d feel a lot less tired.” He lets out another long sigh. “You got shot, Frank. You jumped in front of,” he laughs and looks away, “a fucking bullet.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh?* That’s it?”

“What ... what did you want me to say?” His memory is foggy, and distant in a way that speaks of painkillers. He knows the feeling well. There’s something he’s missing, but right now it seems unimportant against the backdrop of finally feeling like he can breathe.

“Well, apologising for the stress you caused us all after thirteen hours on our feet would be a good start.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Santos was in here earlier. She wanted to check on you. Mel too. And Dana sends her best wishes, along with the hope that this will finally teach you not to say such stupid shit.”

“How is Mel?”

“Let’s just say today was just as bad as *your* first shift here.”

Her first shift. He keeps forgetting. No matter how many times he's been introduced to them, things slip through. He knows them. They don't know him. It's like looking through one-way glass.

"What was in your locker?"

Langdon glances over and sees Robby staring at him. "What?"

"You told me right before your blood pressure hit the basement to check your locker." His gaze is steady. "There wasn't anything in there."

Had he tossed them? All the loops are starting to blur into one on the other side of Friday night, and he frowns. Had he swallowed them? Is that what this is? But no, Robby said he'd been shot, and he remembers the sound cracking through the ER, and his abdomen pinches with pain instead of the ache he recognises.

"Benzos," he says before he realises his mouth is opening, and the word hangs in the air between them. He hadn't realised what a relief it would be to finally say it.

"*Christ.*" Robby ducks his head and scrubs his hands over his hair, taking an audible breath. "No wonder they had to keep upping your meds."

"They did?"

"Yeah," says Robby and, when he meets Langdon's gaze, he looks uncharacteristically angry. "Yeah, Frank, they did. Once they got you topped up with whatever blood we could spare in the middle of a *fucking mass casualty incident*, you kept trying to come to. Scared the shit out of Garcia." He shakes his head like he's in denial. "I'm not going to ask where they've been coming from, but I'm guessing they're not prescription?"

Langdon mumbles, "Sorry."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"You think either of us could've handled that conversation?" Langdon tries to smile at Robby like it's a joke, like they're in this together, but the only thing he meets is a lost look.

For all the times he's been kicked out in the span of one day, each time it seems Robby had reached greater levels of disappointment,

and he himself had only gotten more resigned with every restart. For all that the loops had wiped everyone's memories but his, it seems it had left the emotion to build regardless. Two of them had been trapped, but only one of them had known it.

He shrugs as best he can, and winces as his stitches pull. "I guess I figured if I had one last thing to say, at least I'd be telling the truth."

"And you knew I'd have to do something about the drugs so you decided *dying* was a better option? Telling me on what could very well have been your deathbed?" Robby laughs. "Jesus Christ, Frank, I'm not a fucking *priest*. I can't absolve you."

"I didn't—I didn't expect you to!" he says quickly. "I just ..."

"Just *what*?"

"I don't regret it," he says stubbornly, because he can't say anything else.

"So you've proved you're willing to die for me, and you think that changes my opinion of you." Robby smiles thinly. "I'm honoured. If you ever even *think* about putting yourself in that sort of situation again, HIPAA be damned," he shakes his head, "I am gonna kill you myself."

"I mean it, Robby."

"So do I," Robby snaps. "I don't want your death on my conscience, Langdon."

How many times had Robby been the one to find him? How many times had Robby tried and failed to save him? How many times had Robby been forced to let him go?

How does one rescue balance against so many drownings?

He thinks about the librium and feels the blood drain from his face.

"Hey. Hey, hey, stay with me here, Frank." The head of the bed is lowered and he can see Robby's eyes darting between the vitals machine and his face. There's a buzzing deep inside his head and overlaying it is the sound of air being sucked down a thinning throat. "Talk to me, or I'm getting Garcia. What's going on?"

"Nothing," he chokes out. "It's just ... It's a lot. There were so many

...

The vitals machine slowly stops screaming and returns to regular beeps, if faster than his usual.

"I think," Robby says, "on today of all days, you're allowed a little reflection." The pump button is pressed into his hand.

"Don't ... don't need it."

"If your pain continues the way it's going, your heart rate is going to skyrocket, your blood pressure is going to hit the roof despite the fact you're still low on blood volume, and Garcia is going to come in here and tear us both a new one."

"Yeah," Langdon says shortly, breathless, "I can hear the machine, thanks."

"Take the painkillers then."

"No."

Robby laughs. "You're a stubborn son of a bitch, you know that?"

"What can I say, I had a good teacher." He pauses. "How are ... how is Jake?" He doesn't want to ask about Leah. He doesn't want to risk her being one of the ones that didn't make it.

"Safe. They ran when the shooting started, sent me a text as soon as they'd made it back to the car." Robby inhales deeply, and Langdon thinks about whose ticket it was originally. He thinks about who the gun was pointing at originally too.

"Good," he says quietly. "That would've been—"

"I don't want to think about it."

Langdon nods and his hair brushes against the pillow. "So ... am I fired then?"

He could've kept the benzos a secret as he'd laid there bleeding, but secrets want their way out just as much as blood, and panic with an open mouth is as good a puncture as any. The resignation towards the deaths had slowly extended to a resignation about his future without him noticing.

"You need rehab. Probably therapy too if what I saw yesterday was

any indication.”

“I don’t think I’m the only one.”

Robby softens. “There’s help available for the rest of the staff. Mel can reach out—”

“Will *you*? Take it, I mean.” With the quiet words, all noise in the room turns to silence. “What we saw, what we had to do—it wasn’t easy. For any of us. Some of us ... cope with it better than others.”

“It’s part of working in emergency medicine, you knew that going in —”

“Not like this. Not even—Robby, we see all sorts of shit every day, and it cuts, yeah, but we keep coming back here anyway and fixing what we can. The patients, the rush, it’s—it’s like a drug, man. But this? This was a whole other scalpel. You said it yourself, the nightmares, the ulcers, the—” He stops himself short. He hadn’t meant to overhear that conversation, but the drugs had grown tiring and he’d craved the adrenaline rush of a fall.

“Are you really lecturing me on healthy coping mechanisms?”

“I’m *asking*,” Langdon says, “if you’re okay.”

They stare at each other. Robby looks away first.

“This job will fuck you up if you let it.”

Langdon sighs, loud and breathy. “Yeah, and I let it. Thanks for that.”

And he’s admitting it, finally, a few hundred versions of a day later, with his locker clean and his side aching and Robby sitting next to him like they’re both about to shatter into pieces, but he doesn’t have to be nice about it.

Robby shakes his head. “That’s not what—I wasn’t saying that.”

“You didn’t have to, okay?” He raises a trembling hand and sets it on the bed rail. It feels better to hold onto something, even if his fingers aren’t as strong as they are sober. “I fucked up, Robby. I really fucked up, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry for stealing the—”

“It’s not *about* the meds,” Robby says, and it’s sharp-edged and cutting, though Langdon doesn’t know if it’s intended to cut him or the speaker. “I had to—There is currently a *bullet wound* in my senior

resident. You jumped in front of me and got *shot* in the middle of my ED, on *my* shift, and there was nothing ... there was nothing I could do to s—stop it.” He presses the back of his hand to his mouth, and blinks down at the floor. Langdon doesn’t know what he’s seeing but he knows it isn’t tiles, and he watches as Robby’s eyes grow watery. “There was ... there was so much blood, we couldn’t tell how much of it was yours, it was all over the floor. Your blood pressure dropped enough to have Abbot panicking, and there was an OR available upstairs but we—you almost didn’t get there in time.”

It seems he hasn’t been the only one running on borrowed time.

“It’s not your fault. None of it.”

“*You* were—” Robby stops himself before he can go further and looks at the door.

“You’re not a god.”

Robby chuckles, that high-pitched, breathy, and borderline hysterical sound he makes when something goes really wrong, and doesn’t look at him. “Well, I’m glad you’ve learnt something during your years here.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

Robby shakes his head and looks at the door. He’s still smiling but it’s fixed, wooden and splintering.

He’s breaking, Langdon can see it. He can see the fractures beginning to grow, and he doesn’t know how to fix this.

“You learn to live with it, and you learn to accept it, and you find balance if you can. And if you can’t, you keep trying.” Langdon tightens his fingers around the rail until his knuckles turn white. “*You* told me that. The first time I lost a patient.”

Robby nods jerkily. “I did.”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell you.” Langdon rolls his head to stare up at the ceiling. “I was embarrassed. Ashamed, whatever. It was just my ... just my back. After I helped my parents move. And I could still do my job, it wasn’t like I was making mistakes, and I was never high at work.” He looks intently at Robby. “I’m a fucking good doctor, Robby.”

Robby doesn't say anything. Doesn't affirm or deny it. Doesn't get up and leave either though, and Langdon will take that fact and wrap it around his own throat like a leash.

"You'll need a thirty-day inpatient treatment program," Robby says finally, "followed by random urine tests, fifty to sixty a year, followed by mandatory NA meetings three to four times a week for the first three years."

"Three years?"

"Of a five-year program."

"I'll do it," he says instantly, and when Robby glances at him warily, he gives his best attempt at a smile. It comes out crooked and weak. "Don't you think I've fucked up enough already?"

"I just wish you'd come to me." Robby scrubs a hand over his face and takes a deep breath, and when he's looking Langdon in the face again, his eyes are clear. "*Before* you were bleeding out in front of me. I could've done something."

"Maybe." There's a pleasant thrumming through his body now, a call to sleep, and he's warm and tired. He's so tired. "Or maybe I was just gonna have to fuck up until ... until I fixed it myself."

"I am going to be very clear here: getting yourself shot wasn't fixing anything."

"Didn't *want* to get shot." Langdon hums. "Sometimes I feel like ... like I'm stuck in time," he says quietly, and the words roll off his tongue like lavender. "Like 'm just fucking up the same stuff 'gain 'n' 'gain."

"Sometimes I think I'm still in that room." Robby looks startled and Langdon realises he hadn't intended to say anything, but any glimpses at what's behind the facade he keeps so tightly in place are quickly hidden. "Abbot's recommended a therapist. I could pass on his number if you wanted it. He'll be glad someone's taking him up on the offer."

"Didn't give you one of his ... long and winding ... motivational speeches?"

Robby chuckles. "He said he was saving it for when I didn't look like I was about to jump off the roof."

“Yeah, don’t think he’s the type to ... ‘ppreciate someone taking his spot.”

“You know about that?”

“Uh, *everyone* knows ‘bout that. He has a pizza delivery guy on ... on speed-dial. But,” he pauses, “he hasn’t ... jumped yet.” He blinks slowly and it’s a struggle to open his eyes again. “Might be ... good idea.”

Robby glances over at him and whatever is in his face causes that gaze to stick. “Ulcers, nightmares, suicidal tendencies.”

“Yeah,” Langdon breathes out. “Something like that.”

“Tired?” When he nods, Robby smiles wryly. “Mass casualty incidents will do that to you. Getting shot too, though Abbot would know more about that.”

For a brief moment, Langdon wants to explain, wants to tell him all about the loops and how many times he’s sat on the ED bathroom floor until his eyes couldn’t see anything more than darkness, but it passes with the next wave of pain through his lower abdomen as he shifts on the bed.

At least this time he’s not alone as he drifts off, even if he isn’t dying.

“If you’ve got a tolerance, you should be on higher pain meds,” says Robby. He reaches over, grabs the rejected pump, and tucks it back into Langdon’s hand, pressing it once for good measure. “Abby should be here later this afternoon; they’re letting families of the victims visit after the identification has finished.”

Langdon nods again and his eyes drift closed.

“We’re continuing this conversation later too,” he hears Robby say. “But in the meantime, get some rest.”

His hand is loosened from the rail and placed down on top of the blanket. Fingers press against his pulse point and he wants to ask why Robby doesn’t just check the monitor.

“You’ll visit?” he mumbles into the quiet. “In rehab?”

“So much that you’ll get sick of me.”

He sleeps.

End Notes

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